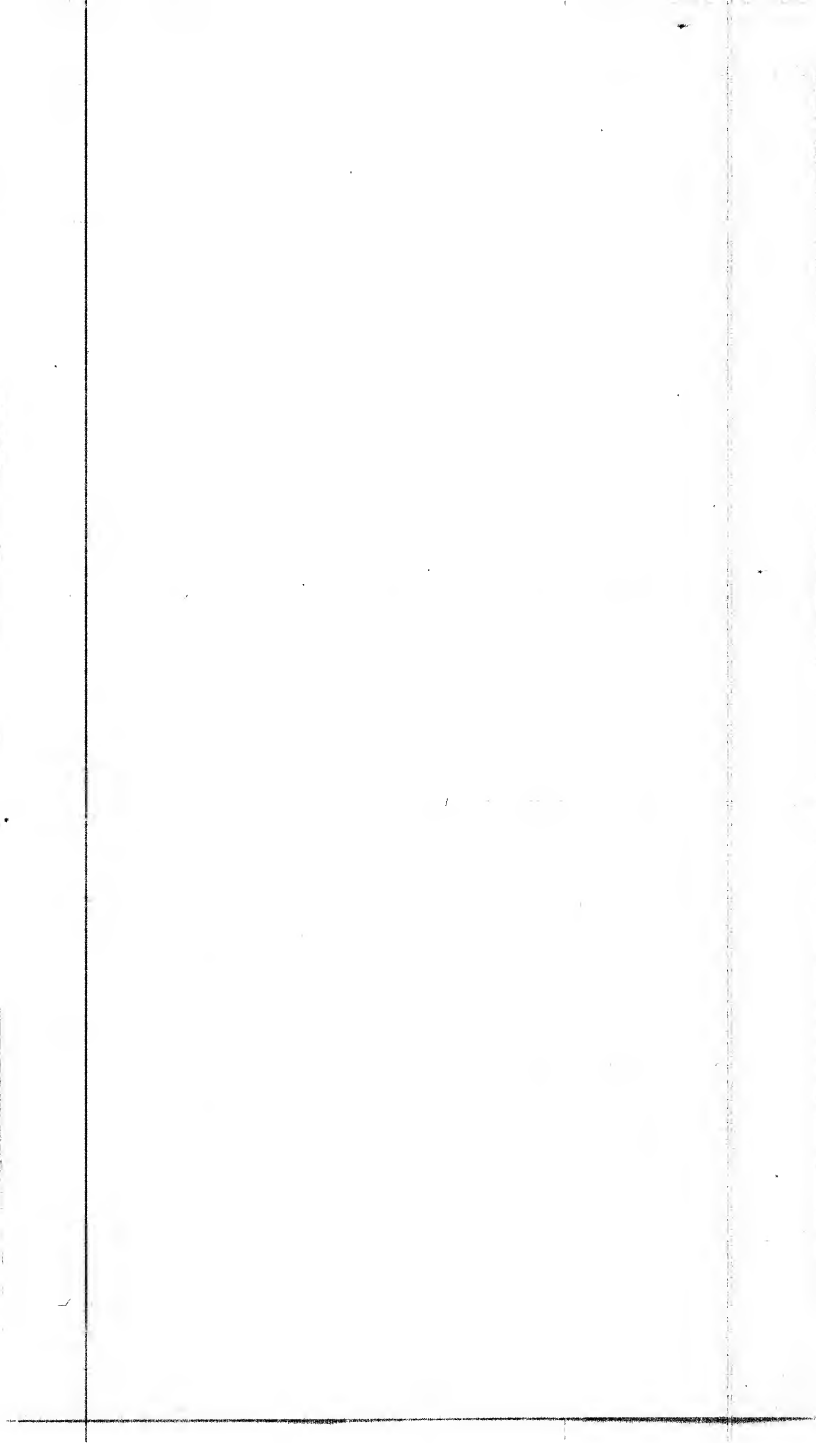


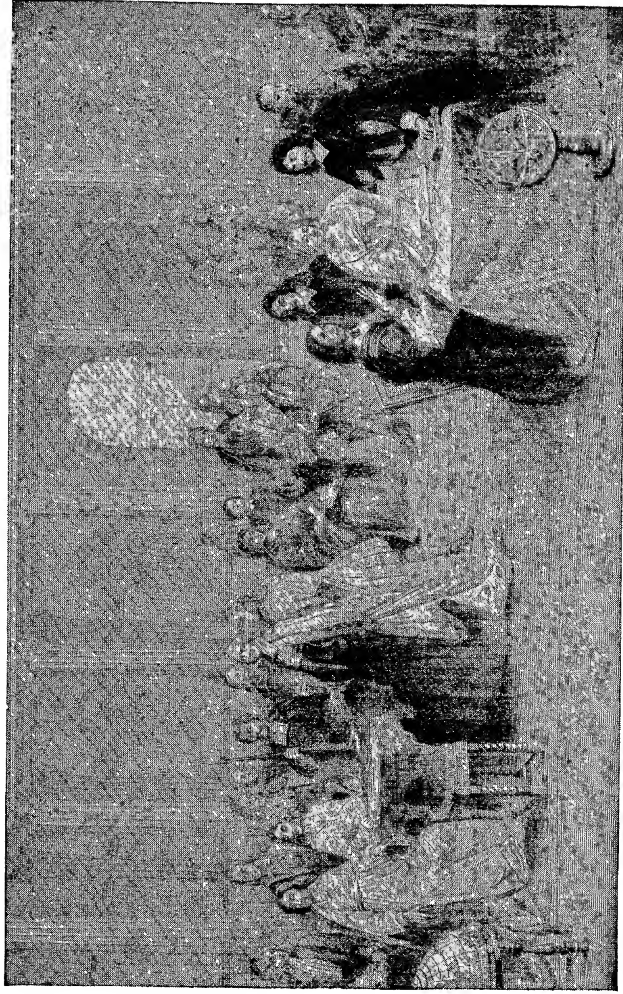
individual; and on this point to adopt the common opinion of philosophers, who say that the difference of greater and less holds only among the *accidents*, and not among the *forms* or *natures* of *individuals* of the same *species*.

I will not hesitate, however, to avow my belief that it has been my singular good fortune to have very early in life fallen in with certain tracks which have conducted me to considerations and maxims, of which I have formed a Method that gives me the means, as I think, of gradually augmenting my knowledge, and of raising it by little and little to the highest point which the mediocrity of my talents and the brief duration of my life will permit me to reach. For I have already reaped from it such fruits that, although I have been accustomed to think lowly enough of myself, and although when I look with the eye of a philosopher at the varied courses and pursuits of mankind at large, I find scarcely one which does not appear vain and useless, I nevertheless derive the highest satisfaction from the progress I conceive myself to have already made in the search after truth, and cannot help entertaining such expectations of the future as to believe that if, among the occupations of men as men, there is any one really excellent and important, it is that which I have chosen.

After all, it is possible I may be mistaken; and it is but a little copper and glass, perhaps, that I take for gold and diamonds. I know how very liable we are to delusion in what relates to ourselves, and also how much the judgments of our friends are to be suspected when given in our favour. But I shall endeavour in this Discourse to describe the paths I have followed, and to delineate my life as in a picture, in order that each one may be able to judge of them for himself, and that in the general opinion entertained of them, as gathered from current report, I myself may have a new help towards instruction to be added to those I have been in the habit of employing.

My present design, then, is not to teach the Method which each ought to follow for the right conduct of his Reason, but solely to describe the way in which I have endeavoured to conduct my own. They who set themselves to give precepts must of course regard themselves as pos-





*Queen Christine of Sweden
Listening to a geometrical demonstration by Descartes
—From the painting by Dumesnil*

THE HARVARD CLASSICS
EDITED BY CHARLES W ELIOT LL D



FRENCH AND ENGLISH
PHILOSOPHERS

DESCARTES · ROUSSEAU
· VOLTAIRE · HOBBS ·

WITH INTRODUCTIONS, NOTES
AND ILLUSTRATIONS



"DR ELIOT'S FIVE-FOOT SHELF OF BOOKS"

P F COLLIER & SON
NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

RENÉ DESCARTES was born at La Haye in Touraine, March 31, 1596. He came of a landed family with possessions in Brittany as well as in the south. His education was begun at the Jesuit College of La Flèche, continued at Paris, and completed by travel in various countries; and his studies were varied by several years of military service. After he began to devote himself to philosophy, he lived chiefly in Holland; but the last five months of his life were spent in Stockholm, at the court of Queen Christina of Sweden, where he died on February 11, 1650.

While still young, Descartes had become profoundly dissatisfied with the scholastic philosophy, which still survived in the teaching of the Jesuits from whom he received his early training; and adopting a skeptical attitude he set out on his travels determined "to gain knowledge only from himself and the great book of the world, from nature and the observation of man." It was in Germany, as he tells us, that there came to him the idea which proved the starting point of his whole system of thought, the idea, "I think, therefore I exist," which called a halt to the philosophical doubt with which he had resolved to regard everything that could conceivably be doubted. On this basis he built up a philosophy which is usually regarded as the foundation of modern thought. Not that the system of Descartes is accepted to-day; but the sweeping away of presupposition of all kinds, and the "method" which he proposed for the discovery of truth, have made possible the whole modern philosophic development. It was in the "Discourse" here printed, originally published in 1637, that this method was first presented to the world.

Descartes was distinguished in physics and mathematics as well as in philosophy; and his "Geometry" revolutionized the study of that science.

[PREFATORY NOTE BY THE AUTHOR.]

If this Discourse appear too long to be read at once, it may be divided into six parts: and, in the first, will be found various considerations touching the Sciences; in the second, the principal rules of the Method which the Author has discovered; in the third, certain of the rules of Morals which he has deduced from this Method; in the fourth, the reasonings by which he establishes the existence of God and of the Human Soul, which are the foundations of his Metaphysic; in the fifth, the order of the Physical questions which he has investigated, and, in particular, the explication of the motion of the heart and of some other difficulties pertaining to Medicine, as also the difference between the soul of man and that of the brutes; and, in the last, what the Author believes to be required in order to greater advancement in the investigation of Nature than has yet been made, with the reasons that have induced him to write.

DISCOURSE ON METHOD

BY RENÉ DESCARTES

PART I

GOOD SENSE is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed; for every one thinks himself so abundantly provided with it, that those even who are the most difficult to satisfy in everything else, do not usually desire a larger measure of this quality than they already possess. And in this it is not likely that all are mistaken: the conviction is rather to be held as testifying that the power of judging aright and of distinguishing Truth from Error, which is properly what is called Good Sense or Reason, is by nature equal in all men; and that the diversity of our opinions, consequently, does not arise from some being endowed with a larger share of Reason than others, but solely from this, that we conduct our thoughts along different ways, and do not fix our attention on the same objects. For to be possessed of a vigorous mind is not enough; the prime requisite is rightly to apply it. The greatest minds, as they are capable of the highest excellencies, are open likewise to the greatest aberrations; and those who travel very slowly may yet make far greater progress, provided they keep always to the straight road, than those who, while they run, forsake it.

For myself, I have never fancied my mind to be in any respect more perfect than those of the generality; on the contrary, I have often wished that I were equal to some others in promptitude of thought, or in clearness and distinctness of imagination, or in fulness and readiness of memory. And besides these, I know of no other qualities that contribute to the perfection of the mind; for as to the Reason or Sense, inasmuch as it is that alone which constitutes us men, and distinguishes us from the brutes, I am disposed to believe that it is to be found complete in each